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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MINSK 000362

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [BO](#)

SUBJECT: LEADERSHIP OF OPPOSITION EMERGES AS KEY ISSUE IN
REGIONAL CONFERENCES

REF: A. MINSK 306

[1](#)B. MINSK 352

Classified By: Ambassador Karen Stewart for reason 1.4 (d).

Summary

[1](#)1. (SBU) The opposition coalition held its first two regional conferences in the Gomel and Minsk oblasts on April 29 to decide on the agenda for the national congress of democratic forces scheduled for May 26-27. Congress organizer Bukhvostov explained to Pol/Econ Chief that the main issue at the conferences was whether there should be a single opposition leader or co-chair shared by all political party leaders. Bukhvostov predicted that should a single leader be chosen, political party leaders' personal ambitions may not allow them to respect the decision of the majority. Poloffs plan to observe the remaining conferences. End summary.

Large Delegate Turnout

[1](#)2. (U) On April 29 in Gomel, approximately 100 regional delegates to the second congress of democratic forces (tentatively scheduled for May 26-27) held a regional conference (ref A). Out of the 123 delegates in the Gomel region, 97 attended. Leader of the Belarusian Party of Communists (BPC) Sergey Kalyakin and head of the Party of Labor and congress organizer Aleksandr Bukhvostov were also present. During the conference, 58 delegates voted for electing an opposition coalition leader at the national congress while 39 favored a co-chairmanship shared by all political party leaders. Gomel security services, police, and fire crews attempted to disrupt the meeting (which was held at the Gomel United Civic Party (UCP) chapter office), claiming that they had received a bomb threat report, but event organizers refused to open the doors. A similar conference was held in the Minsk oblast on April 29, in which the majority of regional delegates (85 in attendance) voted in support of the co-chairmanship option.

More Conferences Planned

[1](#)3. (C) Bukhvostov is preparing for the upcoming regional conferences in Grodno (May 6 - 80 delegates), Minsk city (May 10 - 187 delegates), Brest (May 12 - 80 delegates), Mogilyov (May 12 - 100 delegates), and Vitebsk (May 13 - 139 delegates). Bukhvostov did not apply to authorities for venues, as such applications must be made 15 days in advance and the coalition wanted to hold the regional conferences as soon as possible. In addition, authorities traditionally did

not grant venues for coalition activities, so there was no reason to believe they would act differently for regional conferences. However, Bukhvostov said the coalition would consider applying for GOB facilities to hold the Minsk city regional conference after Pol/Econ Chief relayed to him Deputy Head of the Presidential Administration Nataliya Petkevich's message to EUR DAS Kramer on the coalition congress (ref B).

¶4. (U) The coalition still plans to hold the national congress on May 26-27 and expects approximately 1,000 people to attend (900 delegates and 100 guests). Bukhvostov submitted applications to the Minsk city authorities to hold the congress at the Palace of the Republic (on October Square), the Concert Hall of Minsk, and the Minsk Automobile Factory (MAZ) Hall (where the October 2005 congress was held). He hoped to have an answer from city authorities by May 10.

Leadership Question Crucial For Coalition

¶5. (C) In a May 2 meeting with Pol/Econ Chief and Poloff, Bukhvostov expressed concern that if the majority of the regional conferences voted to include the single leadership question on the agenda of the national congress, the contest for leadership would further fragment the coalition. He predicted that the race would quickly be reduced to BPC Chair Kalyakin and de facto coalition leader Aleksandr Milinkevich -- who would win over Kalyakin due to the latter's communist "baggage" -- as UCP leader Anatoliy Lebedko had indicated that he was not interested in the position. However, Bukhvostov doubted Kalyakin and Lebedko would submit to Milinkevich's leadership and/or remain in the congress. When Pol/Econ Chief asked about the necessity of a congress if

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political party leaders were not committed to respecting the will of the delegates, Bukhvostov agreed that it was a problem but feared that there was no real solution.

Comment

¶6. (C) There is a possibility that selecting a single leader at the national congress could dissolve rather than unite the coalition. However, all the leaders of the democratic opposition agree on the necessity of holding a congress and we hope that the leaders' ambitions and political differences do not come in the way of the delegates' decisions. We plan to observe some of the remaining regional conferences in the coming weeks. Once the results are in, we will be better able to judge the unity of the opposition and the prospects for their national congress.

Stewart